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THE MENACE OF THE ARID LANDS.

A BLESSING TURNED INTO A CURSE.

The immensity of the products of our American agriculture, especially when expressed in terms of money value, has been this fall a favorite theme for a great number of writers in periodicals that do not generally concern themselves particularly with rural topics. The text, expressed or implied, is commonly a little table consolidated from reports of the national Department of Agriculture, which makes the corn yield of the present year 2,650,000,000 bushels, worth $1,060,000,000; the wheat yield 650,000,000 bushels, worth $455,000,000, and the oat yield 935,000,000 bushels, worth $280,500,000, a grand total for the three crops of 4,235,000,000 bushels, bringing to the producers the colossal sum of $1,795,500,000. Nearly two billion dollars divided among the farmers of the United States! Who wouldn't be an American farmer? If anybody is on the highway to wealth, surely he is the man, and no mistake. Such is the general impression that can hardly fail to be received by the ordinary reader of the ordinary newspaper or magazine article on the agricultural history of the present year.

Occasionally, to be sure, it occurs to one of these hurrah writers to do a little further calculation, generally in a footnote, or at any rate inconspicuously, and as if the final results, which do not appear to come out quite as expected, must be susceptible of some explanation and could be of no great consequence anyway. One such glorifier of our tremendous agricultural prosperity computes that if the value of the three great cereal crops were distributed evenly among the families engaged in raising them, each family would receive—each family, mind you, each whole family—about $180. One hundred and eighty dollars for a family as its gross return, not by any means net profit, for the grain marketed by its working members during a year of enormous abundance!

I was talking not long ago with a man of considerable means, not acquired in agriculture, but a real farmer and the descendant of generations of farmers, occupying ancestral fields of large dimensions in one of the most productive regions of New York, fields that have always been carefully tilled and abundantly fertilized,

with due attention to rotation and to the selling of finished products, and he said: "The fact of it is, the drift of things in this country is steadily reducing our farmers to the condition of the peasantry of the old nations of Europe, a condition in which sustenance, of a very plain sort, may reasonably be expected, but in which there is positively no hope for anything better than unceasing toil, no opportunity whatever of accumulating even the most modest competence." Another man, joining in the conversation, said: "Yes; and have you noticed the great number of advertisements in the *Country Gentleman* of farmers who want situations as managers on gentlemen's places, and of gentlemen who want farmers to operate their places? The farmers are becoming quite a distinct class from the gentlemen. That is most strikingly a feature of our own times. Our grandfathers, our fathers even, if they were Americans, would have regarded such a distinction as that as hardly conceivable in this country."

These gentlemen put the case pretty strongly, but no one who takes a broad survey of all the facts will deny that they have some colorable sanction for their view, and the computation of the newspaper writer who would give the farm families of the country a gross return of $180 each family from our principal cereals, forms a kind of bridge by which one may pass back and forth between the consideration of the stupendous aggregate value of the products of our farms and the consideration of the real financial condition and, above all, the hopes for the near future, of the farmers themselves. Taking both groups of facts into view, the idea will gradually dawn upon the mind of any one who will take the trouble to give the matter even cursory and superficial examination, that the vast development of our national contributions to the sustenance of the world has no necessary relation whatever to the welfare of the men who raise the crops. American agriculture may flourish like a green bay tree while the American farmer receives, on the whole, and as compared with other classes of the community, a pitiably meager return in the way of compensation for his labor, interest on his capital and reward for his special services to mankind.

It is to the failure to notice the very simple and, when one thinks of it, perfectly manifest fact just mentioned that is due, more than to all other causes put together, the permitted existence in the body politic of whatever evils environ, unnecessarily and unjustly, the farmer's lot. We have thought far too much about developing our agriculture, far too little about improving the condition of our agriculturists. We have acted blindly, as blind nature acts, for the increase of the species, with little or no regard to the fate of the individual. There is no single plant, no single insect, no single microbe, that one man alone may not easily destroy. There is no species of plants or of insects or of microbes that all mankind acting together could readily annihilate. For the protection, the continuation, the multiplication of the species, nature has provided by a thousand devices of infinite ingenuity, against which the attacks of whatever enemies may arise are generally doomed to spend themselves in failure. For the welfare of the individual nature cares nothing at all.

Just so with the American public as it expresses itself through great lines of national policy. Every American has a more or less clearly conceived apprehension of the fact that all our prosperity rests upon our agriculture, and is, therefore, pretty certain to understand, if he thinks about the matter at all, that our agriculture ought to be fostered; but that is as far as the average American goes. It never occurs to most people for an instant that it is quite possible to foster our agriculture by methods that will certainly degrade our agriculturists, and that in doubling the volume of the agricultural products of the country at large we may, if we go about the doubling process in certain ways, really divide by two the net returns for those products as they come into the possession of the individual farmer.

It is natural, as has been said, to think in the fashion referred to, because it is in this way that nature works. It is natural also, so far as this country is concerned, for another reason. Time was, and not so very long ago in the life of the nation, when no distinction could be drawn, in the United States at least, between the prosperity of farming and the prosperity of the farmers. The first was then, as now, absolutely necessary, and the second went with it inevitably and as matter of course, and we inherit a certain inability to perceive that the two are not necessarily one. The idea of developing our agriculture, letting our agriculturists take care of themselves, has become, by heredity, and in the absence of reflection on the changing circumstances of changing times, one of the most firmly fixed notions that have taken possession of the American mind. It is on a par with the common American craze for increasing the population of the country, and, indeed, is much the same thing. The more people we have and the more cereals we raise, the better off must we certainly be—such is the ordinary belief, and it is not at all to be wondered at. The facts of the genesis of the notion are these:

From the time of the first European settlements on these shores down to a period almost within the memory of men now living, it was not only taken for granted on all sides, but really was indisputable truth, that every foot of extension of the civilized occupation of this country back into the wild interior, every increase in population not positively vicious, was in many ways a real and solid gain to the people of the American colonies and of the young United States. Occupying as our forefathers did but a narrow strip of land along the Atlantic coast, with only inchoate manufactures, very slow and uncertain communication between different sections, and agriculture not much more than adequate to provide for very modest living, the one thing that was needed before all others was development of the nation. The father of a large family of stalwart sons and daughters was most distinctly a public benefactor. As the children moved westward, bringing into cultivation acre after acre of new soil, and thus supplying better and better the needs of a growing population and enlarging the material resources of the common stock, they were laying broad and deep the foundations of the future greatness of the nation, and every pioneer deserved a godspeed from all well wishers for mankind. If any central authority had exercised, say a century ago, effective control over the unoccupied

lands that stretched off, seemingly without limit, to the west, it could not possibly have done a better thing for all concerned than to facilitate by every means within its power, including national irrigation, if that had been then possible and necessary, the taking up of these lands as fast as might be by anybody who could be induced to occupy and cultivate them. Pioneering and homesteading were philanthropic occupations of the very first order of necessity and merit.

But it should never be forgotten—it very often is forgotten—that the circumstances of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in this country were radically different from those that surround us here in the twentieth; and that many lines of public policy once eminently laudable have become obnoxious and dangerous as times change. When a baby weighs ten pounds, it has just one alternative before it—grow, or die; when in after years the ten pounds have become two hundred, the condition of affairs is changed; further increase is suggestive rather of dropsy than of growth. The behavior most suitable to the infant nation, just stretching its unformed limbs and not yet quite certain what sort of creature it will grow to be, becomes in the highest degree absurd when maturity has been attained, and the former infant has reached the understanding and enjoyment of the powers of manhood. Of this obvious fact, in its obvious relation to a rational management of the public domain, and especially to all plans of whatever name or nature for bringing into cultivable condition at the public cost the vast territory now lying arid, sight has largely and most unfortunately been lost by the American people. We go on hurrahing for every increase that successive censuses reveal in our population, with very little consideration of the prosperity of the people that have been added—in our agricultural area, with very little consideration of its actual value to the nation—and above all, in our production of crops, without any consideration at all of the profit of growing them, or the real financial progress of the men who are feeding half the world. The irrigation party of the far west is only a symptom and a manifestation of that old notion, once true and still powerful, a generation or more after it has ceased to fit the times, that the accommodation within our borders of as many people as possible is the great national desiderandum.

Now, in point of fact, the ideal of the irrigationists, which I understand to be the making of the United States support as large a population as its territory can be made to feed, is just about the very lowest and most unworthy ambition that a great nation can set before its eyes. If swarming millions, cultivating every square foot of ground that can be irrigated or otherwise coaxed into producing food plants, make a nation great, then is the condition of native India most glorious; then does China furnish a nearly perfect model for the imitation of the United States.

My own view is radically different. It seems to me that it is not nearly so much the increase of our people as the happiness of our people that we should think about and labor to promote. Now the happiness of a nation, like the happiness of a family, does not depend entirely on its being numerous. It may be said, rather, to rest upon a tripod. The first column, absolutely indispensable, is character, including

of course mental development, general education, appreciation of the advantages of law and order, all that is included in the term civilization. The second column, absolutely indispensable also, is the preservation of the public health, a general enforcement of hygienic law, the exclusion by quarantine of exotic diseases, and the prompt suppression of domestic epidemics. The third column, absolutely indispensable like the others, is well-distributed financial prosperity. The very foundations of this third column, so far as the farmers of the land are concerned,—and it should never be forgotten that their prosperity is the underlying support of the prosperity of all the rest, the mudsill of our national structure, if you like to put it so,—have been for long years undergoing a process of attack by the operation of our public land system in general; and the irrigation project, as developed in the unwise, unpatriotic and unjust law passed by the last congress, threatens to complete the work of destruction, and reduce the condition of the men who have bought farms and paid for them, as the gentleman whom I have quoted said, to that of the humblest peasantry of Europe.

Let us consider for a moment, if you please, the operation of our public land system as it has worked in recent years, even without the assistance of the irrigation feature, in relation to the financial prosperity of the Americans who own and operate farms. The whole matter may be summed up in a nutshell by saying that these men have been subjected for a generation or more to a competition by the national government that has been little short of ruinous. The average rate of alienation of our public lands for the last decade has been nearly 11,500,000 acres per annum, which is approximately a million acres per month, over 31,000 acres per day, about 1,300 acres per hour, or say one acre every three seconds, day and night, Sundays and holidays all included. Imagine yourselves standing at the boundary, if there were such a boundary, between the land now the property of individuals and that which still belongs to the nation at large, and seeing that boundary moving before your eyes into the government possessions at such a rate of speed that the latter were steadily shrinking, day after day, year after year, at the rate of 21 acres per minute. Such is the insane haste with which we have thrown this property into market, offering it practically for nothing to anybody and everybody who will take it. The return that the government receives from the average of its land parted with has been lately about 20 cents per acre above the cost of marketing it. What has been the effect on the prosperity of established farmers?

In the first place, of course, one thinks naturally of the competition of the new farms, in the markets of the world. I am inclined myself to the opinion that the injury in this direction is rather less than might be supposed, and that it is in fact very far from being the darkest element of the problem. The growth of population must of itself take care of the increased production, in part. The new farmers need an infinity of things that they cannot possibly produce. That helps manufactures; manufactures require workmen; workmen must eat; and thus the established farmers of the older regions will find a certain increase in the demand for their products, mak-

ing up, in part, for the new supply thrown upon the market by their multiplying competitors. And then again, the price of breadstuffs is very largely governed by the yield of crops abroad and the occurrences of every kind that take place in foreign countries. Wheat may bring a high price, though the American crop be immense; it may go begging, though our fields yield the scantiest return. Still, of course, it is patent that on the whole every new state in an agricultural region, every district brought from aridity into cultivation by irrigation, will for a long time export a considerable surplus of food-stuffs of some sort, and thus act distinctly to a certain extent in bearing down the market price. But that is only the beginning.

A second channel of mischief is the absorption by the new lands of the men and women who ought to supply, and in the normal condition of things would supply, an abundance of labor, at moderate wages, for established farmers. The demand for really efficient farm help, at prices that farmers can afford to pay, is left largely unsatisfied, to the injury of the farming interest, and perhaps most of all to the overburdening of the wife of the small farmer with tasks of which hired servants should greatly relieve her—by the facility with which the persons who ought to supply it can go west and become farmers on their own account, your property and mine being freely offered them for that purpose. Why should anybody work for you, except perhaps at extravagant compensation, when the government is willing and anxious to make him a landed proprietor himself practically without money and without price?

Nor is it farm labor alone that is drawn from its natural home by the recklessness of Uncle Sam in giving everybody a farm. A class of people better off financially go west also, and take their money with them, the class among whom the farmer looks for tenants if he wishes to let his property, for purchasers if he wishes to sell. Why should a man of some means hire your farm or buy it, if he can get one of his own for nothing, grow up with the country, and presently land in congress and go to passing irrigation bills?

Now notice, please, how these three wrongs converge to drain the very lifeblood of the established farmer who has bought his farm and paid for it, or (still worse) owes something on it. The value of his crops is reduced by unfair and illegitimate competition; the supply of labor that he needs is minimized and therefore its price enhanced; and the class among whom he ought to be able to find tenants or purchasers is seriously restricted. The same malign influences act, of course, on all his brother farmers. Their profits, like his, are fearfully diminished, and many of them, like him, are offering their farms to anybody who will pay a decent rent or buy at a reasonable value. Thus an unnatural and intensely pernicious competition is set up,—set up by our own government, mind you, by giving away our own land —a competition not so much between the East and the West as between neighbors in the older states, for the disposal of their property. So of course the value shrinks; the farmer falls out of the rank in the social scale that he ought to hold, because his property has so little money value, for, say what you will, a man's standing in

society is regulated very largely by his supposed financial means. And if he wishes to borrow money on his farm, he finds not only that it is valued far below what would be normally a reasonable sum, but also that lenders are rather loth to advance money on farm security at all, because the sale of such property is slow and uncertain.

The American farmer ought to be not only the most independent being on earth, but one of the most envied. Of all property in this country, a farm ought to be the most desired and the quickest in demand. There should be a dozen would-be purchasers or tenants bidding against each other for every farm that there is supposed to be a chance to get. The possession of a farm in the United States, especially in the older settled regions, should be, and under normal conditions would be, like the possession of land in the environs of a great and fast growing city, certain to enrich the owner, or at least his children, by natural and inevitable increase in value from the increasing demand of a multiplying population. Farm mortgages should be the most sought for of all investments, and the interest should be reduced, by competition of lenders, to about half of what has now to be paid, while the amount that can easily be borrowed should be about twice what it is now. Every skilful farmer, operating a property of any reasonable dimensions, should not only be sure of a living but should be on the highway to wealth, or at least have before him every probability of acquiring very much more than an ample competence for his declining years.

The difference between this condition of affairs—the normal, natural and proper condition for this preëminently agricultural country—and the condition that actually prevails, is due, wholly and absolutely, to one single cause, the prolongation, far beyond the time of its usefulness, of the American passion for developing the country, and especially for developing its agriculture, while we ought to have been thinking, instead, of the financial returns to the individual agriculturist. In our mad passion for what is called development, for filling up the country with people, any and every sort of people, we have rashly undermined the column of financial prosperity for the common farmer, and have therefore endangered not only his happiness but the happiness of all.

Nevertheless it might be thought, it long has been thought, that the immense evils of the perpetuation of our superannuated public land system were slowly working out their own cure. The arable public land has been so recklessly wasted and worse than wasted, so forced upon an already fearfully overloaded market, that it is now nearly gone. I suppose it is within bounds to say that there hardly remains unappropriated a desirable homestead in any state washed by the Mississippi or its affluents; and they are scarce anywhere. As the Year Book of the Department of Agriculture some years ago said: "All the best parts of the public domain have been appropriated, and comparatively very little good agricultural land remains open to settlement." It would seem that we are within sight of the beginning of the end of the mischief, and might hope now for a gradual improvement in the price

of farm property, the supply of wild land being nearly exhausted, while our population is increasing by leaps and bounds. This ray of hope is well-nigh extinguished by the spectre of national irrigation at the national expense, your expense and mine, which materialized into very solid form in the passage by the last congress of the bill appropriating an unknown number of millions of dollars, the proceeds of all future sales of the public lands, your property and mine, for the purpose of rendering fruitful by irrigation and then giving away I don't know how many hundreds of millions of acres of land now arid, thus postponing to the time of our great-grand-children or later the condition of affairs which shall create a sharp demand, with constantly rising prices, for agricultural land. Unless that bill be repealed, and similar projects defeated for years to come, we have before us only a second stage in the work of spoliation. And that is my objection to the whole irrigation scheme in all its protean forms, to any scheme for increasing the cultivated area of the United States until such time as the land that has been bought and is cultivated by individual taxpayers shall come into such demand, by the growing requirements of our growing population, as to multiply very greatly its present money value. The whole irrigation project is a project to rob and impoverish the largest and most useful element of our American population, for the benefit of the handful of people in the newer states, most of these people themselves being, directly or indirectly, the beneficiaries of the government—that is to say, the beneficiaries of the American people—under the operation of that miserable old homestead law and similar out-of-date methods that we have thoughtlessly permitted to perpetuate themselves into a century for the circumstances and conditions of which they have no fitness whatsoever. We have turned, by our improper appropriation and reckless squandering, what ought to have been a priceless heritage for distant generations to come, into a veritable curse of our own times. In developing our agriculture, we are crushing our agriculturists.

So much for the question of public policy involved in our management of the national domain. Now consider, please, the equities of the matter, the rights and the wrongs. This is no sort of a sectional plea, no setting up of one part of the country or one class of our people as entitled to any kind of special favor from the government, or special protection from competition. Not a bit of it; nothing like it. But as a great deal has been said about furnishing homes for the homeless, and a great many birds seem to have been caught with that chaff, let us notice just here the fundamental principles involved. In the first place, a farm is primarily a factory, only incidentally and accidentally a home; keep that distinction very clearly and sharply in mind, I pray you. Of course, the owner may live on the premises; so may the owner of a cotton mill. But in every respect in which the occupancy of new farms at the far West affects the interests of the present owners of the property out of which they are carved, the people of the United States, each new farm is to be considered entirely as a new factory, entering directly into competition with those now established. The irrigation scheme does not at all differ in essential

characteristics from a plan of inveigling the government into building and equipping thousands of new factories and giving them to any impecunious but enterprising applicants who might come along. Think what our manufacturers now established in business would say to a project like that! If it would be grossly iniquitous and monstrous, as is of course evident, why is a similar project any better if it is foodstuffs that are to be manufactured instead of cloth or buttons, and if it is the farmers instead of the mill owners of the country that are to suffer?

Please notice, secondly, that the wild lands are the property of all the people, just as much the property of the farmer in the northeast corner of Maine or the orange grower on the Florida peninsula as of those who live around them. According to the figures of the National Irrigation Association, about thirteen-fourteenths of all our population are east of the arid region, and the plan of this association and of those who act with it is simply to deprive this enormous majority of all their ownership in the property referred to—property perfectly certain to appreciate in selling value enormously after a generation or two—that it may be used, directly and actively, to the injury of the present owners, in the interest of what is called developing the country and benefiting the mere handful of people in the newer regions. If some of our western friends were owners of valuable lots in Boston which they preferred to keep vacant until a growing demand should bring an increase in their selling value, and the Bostonians living around these lots should endeavor to seize them, under color of developing Boston and providing homes for the homeless, one can imagine the indignation of the owners and the opinion they would express of the shameless rapacity of the plotters. Their own plan is precisely the same, except for a difference in the location of the coveted booty.

Permit me now to read to you what I think the best brief summary of the whole business that has yet appeared—a preamble and resolutions adopted without a dissenting voice at the last annual meeting of the National Grange of Patrons of Husbandry, at Lewiston, Me., eleven months ago. They run thus:

"Whereas, the one great burden on the farming interests of the United States consists in the perpetuation of the superannuated policy of the government in giving away its arable lands to anybody and everybody who will occupy them, thereby constantly maintaining and increasing a most unfair competition with farmers already established, and diverting to the far West thousands of men who would naturally furnish the much needed force of labor for farmers who have bought their lands and paid or agreed to pay for them; and

"Whereas, this injury would be continued for many generations longer, should any project be adopted for bringing unto cultivable state the immense tracts of the public domain now arid; therefore be it

"Resolved, That this body, representing in large measure the agricultural interests of the whole country, denounces all projects for irrigating any portion of the public domain at the public expense.

"Resolved, That an authenticated copy of these resolutions be forwarded by registered mail to the President of the United States, with the request that he refer

to the matter in his message to the coming congress, and that he withhold executive approval from any bill intended to pave the way for government irrigation, should the advocates of such a measure succeed in securing its passage by the two houses."

These resolutions, I repeat, were adopted unanimously at the last annual meeting of the National Grange of Patrons of Husbandry, an order that has pretty nearly a million members and is assuredly entitled, as far as is possible for any sort of organization that you can imagine, to speak for the farming population of the entire country, especially as twenty-five of the thirty states that have full organization were represented on that occasion by duly accredited delegates. One would really think that their unanimous declaration, on a matter so clearly vital to their interest, the greatest interest by far of the United States, would have been treated at Washington with respectful consideration, to say the least of it. How it was treated, the country knows.

One word in conclusion, to anticipate a possible reply. It is often said by the far western party that we at the east don't know much about irrigation anyhow, and that if we would study it at the west we should become ardent converts. Well, I have myself examined the workings of the process in, I believe, almost every state and territory in which it has been put into operation. No man can describe the possibilities of production of the arid lands under irrigation in terms so strong that I will not believe him. The point is, not at all that we Easterners do not know what irrigation will do. We know too well. If the government is going into that business, we can point out thousands of farms east of the Mississippi where we should like to see it tried, and tens of thousands of farms east of the Mississippi where we should like to see the government apply the correlative of irrigation, tile drainage, at the public expense, if the government is to go into such operations at all. Do not take that statement as a joke. There is no doubt whatever that the expenditure east of the 98th meridian (which is the eastern boundary of arid America, according to the Irrigation Association) of the millions of dollars proposed to be used west of that line, in irrigating and draining farms already in operation, would increase their product by a larger volume than will be raised west of it, for generations to come, under the irrigation scheme, while enormously enhancing their value and the prosperity of the owners, and therefore of the nation at large, instead of setting up, at public expense, dangerous and illegitimate competition. An individual owner is very foolish indeed to add to his holdings while he does not half cultivate half of what he now pretends to crop. Why does not the same principle exactly apply to a nation?

As for the arid public lands, the greater the possibilities of irrigation, the greater the evil of doing it, at the present stage of our history, at the public cost. If we could lock them all up and forget their existence for a century to come, the greatest industry of America, and therefore the greatest interest of the greatest number of Americans, would have a far brighter future before it than now presents itself to the farmer of the present day and his sons and grandsons, who should have every inducement possible to follow in his footsteps.

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The Menace of the Arid Lands

AN ADDRESS

BEFORE THE

FARMERS' NATIONAL CONGRESS

AT

MACON, GA., Oct. 9th, 1902.

BY GILBERT M. TUCKER,

EDITOR OF THE COUNTRY GENTLEMAN,

ALBANY, N. Y.

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